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Animation and Boundlessness

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Alexander Zahlten, “Seigen no Nasa to Animeshon” (Animation and Boundlessness), *Japanese Journal of Animation Studies* 14, no. 1a (2013): 51-56.

Animation and Boundlessness

The academic study of animation has increased remarkably in the last one and a half decades, to a degree that may lead some to suspect a research bubble. It is not yet entirely clear what will emerge when this somewhat amorphous formation pops and priorities are re-examined. The entire expansion process has been quite exciting to observe, but the strong unpredictability of its further fate also points to an absence of rigorous and widespread debate about what the study of animation means.

Paul Ward has argued that those currently working on animation are not working in “Animation Studies” (Ward 2011). Animation is, so far, not a discipline but a subject. Ward is quick to point out that there is nothing inherently problematic about this. In fact, it has contributed to a remarkable inclusivity in terms of approaches and perspectives and has helped fuel the rapid research expansion of recent years. The increasing complexity and sophistication of current work on animation has produced fascinating results along with a bit of sound and fury.

This would seem like a healthy state of affairs, and a very promising one for the study of animation. But the high degree of conceptual experimentation and recombination of approaches we are seeing in publications and at conferences also points to a basic problem in the study of animation in the English language context. Animation has become a playground for trying out, where the projection of interesting ideas can take place fairly unchecked. Animation could become such a flexible playground because it is wide open, so to speak, and still fairly unknown. At the recent conference on the history of film theory in East Asia held in Ann Arbor, Thomas Lamarre rightly pointed out that the reason that Lev Manovich can claim that animation is the new (moving image) media paradigm, and that no one protests, is simply because we still do not really know what animation is. This is not to claim that there is an ontological truth of animation yet to be discovered, but to indicate that animation has become a convenient Other to be utilized for projections of various kinds. In a sense this is the displaced Other of exoticism, and it is maybe not so surprising that anime plays an important role in this kind of dynamic, at least in English-language scholarship. In Japan animation scholarship has, with some very recent exceptions, generally stayed much more grounded (or trapped) in historically oriented research. This is despite the fact that the first monograph ever dedicated to animation, Imamura Taihei’s *Manga Eiga Ron* (1941), allowed itself a fair amount of speculative thought (although a recent edited volume such as アニメは越境する / *Anime wa Ekkyô Suru* / “Anime Crosses Borders” is an attempt

at breaking up this state of affairs and creating an intersection between Japanese- and English-language scholarship).

The reference point for this Otherness of animation is a shifting one. Traditionally animation has always been the Other of live action film, indeed this has been a primary means of defining it. Animation received the stamp of relevance at exactly the point in time when the status of the “real” that live action film represented had come to be seen as increasingly tenuous. Mark Langer has proclaimed the “end of animation history” as this dialectic of animation and live action is supposedly sublated (*aufgehoben*) and a hybrid appears in which live-action and animation are increasingly indistinguishable, or at least the distinction loses its attraction. Interestingly, anime achieved global recognition exactly parallel to this supposed development towards indistinguishability. Oshii Mamoru has been putting this claim of conversion into praxis for some time (see also his book 『すべての映画はアニメになる』 / “All Films are Becoming Anime”. Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2004). In line with these ideas about conversion, speculative thought on media in Japan of the 2000s has largely moved away from the 1990s work relying on media specificity, and talks more generally about the “media environment” composed of the network of manga, anime, and especially games.

What then, is the nature of the Other that animation is becoming now, for an increasingly large number of scholars? In terms of what it seems to offer researchers one might say it is the Other of boundedness (aesthetically and theoretically), and in that sense it has been burdened with transcendental qualities. Again, it is no surprise that anime, with its temporal and national mobility – in terms of its narratives, its aesthetics, and audience contexts – has become central to this drive. To some degree it seems that anime has absorbed the debates about specificity (and the hope for specific potential theoretical gains) that once – beginning with Eisenstein – were held for animation as a whole. For one branch of research, anime has become a metonym of trans-: It is transnational, transmedial, transdisciplinary. That this is part of a wider pattern does not mean it is not productive. Some have utilized it to produce some of the best media scholarship around, and books such as Marc Steinberg’s *Anime’s Media Mix* (2012) have consciously and brilliantly made use of it. But to proceed from this moment in the study of animation out, the specific dynamics, methods and potential payoff of the study of animation has to be made an explicit topic of discussion. The promise of boundlessness (i.e. of infinite possibilities) is too close to stereotypical ideas about animation and to a very specific ideology to be left unreflected upon.

Firstly, while the inclusiveness of the field of the study of animation has allowed cultural studies approaches, Deleuzian perspectives, classical hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, formalism and other methodologies to co-exist and even engage, other possibilities have been left untouched. The digital humanities have yet to make any kind of impact on the study of animation, as do postcolonial approaches or a more nuts-and-bolts type of formal analysis. Secondly, the positing as boundless carries real potential along with its problems as long as there is a degree of reflection on this strategy. The

questions of mobility and interconnectivity, of larger systemics that coordinate constellations of media in different modes of capitalism, are some of the most pressing of the currently developing media ecology in East Asia and across the globe. A closer look at these may lead to emergence theory or to a renegotiation of the relation between texts and contexts (of labor/consumption/visuality/fictionality) that are all interlocking in new and unexpected ways. Or it may lead to something completely different but hopefully just as relevant. If the study of animation and its tentative positing as “boundless” provokes a focus on these central issues along with supplying the intellectual energy to drive such research it is a fiction worth pursuing.

Paul Ward, “Animation Studies, Disciplinarity, and Discursivity” in *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 3 (2), Spring 2003.

Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix. Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

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